

## green-flowering edibles

**CATTAIL** (*Typha latifolia*)

FLOWERS: May - July

DESCRIPTION: Long, thin, parallel-veined leaves. Green bloom spikes turn brown in midsummer. Cattail Family.

HABITAT: Swamps, muddy margins of ponds and streams, wet places

LOCATION: Statewide

COLLECTION: Shoots, April - June; Spikes, June - July; Pollen, June - July; Roots, November - March

USES: Salad, vegetable, flour, jelly, pickle

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The cattail is a remarkable wild food pantry all by itself. This tall, stately reservoir of food is a constant source of supply the entire year. Around March the cattail begins sending up new shoots from the roots. These whitish protuberances make a good pickle substitute. Later March finds the cattail shoots pushing above ground. These new shoots, preferably under two feet tall, have a central core that is white and an excellent, versatile vegetable. By spreading the outer leaves and reaching down the stalk, the core breaks apart from the root and pulls out easily. Eaten raw, it gives a hint of cucumber to a tossed salad. Boiled for a few minutes in

salted water and doused with butter you have asparagus ambrosia! The Russians enjoy this vegetable, giving it the nickname of Cossack Asparagus. I also blanch and freeze some for winter's use because it is so good. The same part of the young shoots may be pickled and an entirely new taste is introduced.

As the shoots develop, green bloom spikes begin peeking out of a thin husk. The first year I began my cattail hunt I missed this stage entirely. This is surprising since the plants develop at different stages, giving it a six- or seven-week season. All stages, therefore, may very well be gathered the same day. Now that I've located what I'm looking for, I break off the top spike and prepare as I would corn on the cob. Place the spikes in boiling water and boil for about 5 minutes, drain and coat with butter. This vegetable, like most wilds, has a taste and texture uniquely its own. It resembles corn on the cob only because of the long plastic-like darning needle core that remains when the "tails" or "heads" are nibbled off.

I'm extremely fond of this vegetable, although wild food party friends have had mixed opinions. The buds may be scraped off and used in a casserole as Scaloped Cattails. Scrape off 2 cups cattail flowers and put in a bowl with 2 beaten eggs,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup melted butter,  $\frac{1}{2}$  t sugar and nutmeg, a  $\frac{1}{2}$  t also of black pepper. Blend well and scald 1 cup milk which is added slowly to the cattail mixture and blended. Pour the mixture into a greased casserole and top with  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup grated Swiss cheese and a dab of butter. Bake at 275 degrees for 30 minutes. I've tried cattail in a variety of casseroles and like this recipe the most.

Cattail pollen biscuits are a big favorite with everybody who has ever tried them. The green bloom spikes turn a bright yellow as they become covered with pollen. I put a large plastic bag over the entire head (or tail?) and shake. The pollen is very fine, resembling a curry-colored talc powder. Pancakes, muffins and cookies are excellent by substituting pollen for wheat flour in any recipe. Try these Cattail Pollen Biscuits. Mix  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup cattail pollen,  $1\frac{3}{4}$  cups flour, 3 t baking powder, 1 t salt, 4 T shortening,  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup milk. Bake, after cutting out biscuits, in 425-degree oven for 20 minutes. For an even more golden tone, you may add an additional  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of pollen. While experimenting with the pollen in various recipes, I made some Cattail Pollen Pancakes which my husband said were the best pancakes he's ever had. Mix  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup pollen,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup flour, 2 T baking powder, 1 t salt, 1 egg, 1 scant cup milk, 3 T bacon drippings. Pour into a hot skillet or griddle in dollar, 4-inch or super-size pancake amounts. They are better yet when topped with an elderberry syrup or when a few dried elderberries are added.

The roots offer the next course after the pollen. I found that it was foolish to refine the flour in the summer, because an all-day effort yielded only about ¼ cup flour. However, another root dig, this time in the early spring, was very successful. The rope-like roots are 6-8 inches deep and very plentiful. By peeling the outside layer and spongy layers away, the central core is left. This edible core is very fibrous and filled with a starchy material. By cutting the section into 4-inch pieces and allowing it to dry for a day, you can rub out enough flour for biscuits, pancakes, whatever is your choice. The taste is nutty or marshy, but it is good and acquired in a short period of time.

The remaining fiber sections of the roots can be placed in water so that the flour which is left may also be refined. Allow the slimy and white particles to settle, pour off the water and replace with fresh water. Repeat this process every hour or so for four or five cycles. This flour may be used wet, if used immediately in drop biscuits or cookies. I was unable to pour off all of the water without losing my wet-stage cattail flour. To this moist, somewhat slimy starch I added an equal amount of flour, 3 t baking powder, 1 t salt, 4 T shortening, generous ½ cup milk. Drop the biscuit onto an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake in a 425-degree oven until brown. Chocolate chip cookies made with the same moist flour were equally good. Again there is a marshy taste. I merely used my favorite chocolate chip cookie recipe and halved the cattail and white flour, putting it into a 350-degree oven to bake.

I've also used the roots, after the first flour has been rubbed out, to make jelly. The jelly is made by boiling the roots for 10 minutes in enough water to cover them. For every cup of liquid, add equal amounts of sugar and a package of pectin per every four cups of juice. The jelly is delicious, somewhat resembling honey in both color and taste.

I'm truly surprised more use isn't made of this fantastic natural pantry!!!!

**GRASSES** (*Gramineae*)

**FOXTAIL GRASS**

(*Setaria glauca*)

**CRAB GRASS** (*Digitaria*

*sanguinalis*)

**GOOSE GRASS**

(*Eleusine indica*)

FLOWERS: June - November

DESCRIPTION: See Steyer-  
mark

HABITAT: Waste ground,  
lawns, gardens,  
pastures, railroads,  
roadsides

LOCATION: Statewide

COLLECTION: June -  
November

USES: Cereals, breadstuff



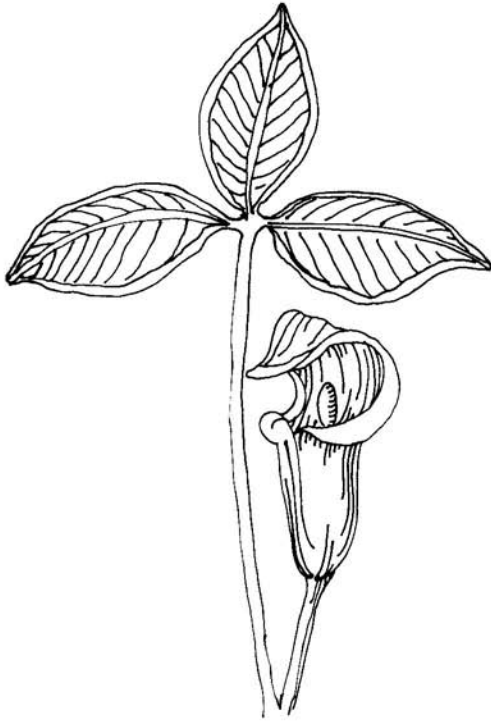
While the collection of these small seeds from the grasses is tedious, they are, nonetheless, edible sources.

The foxtail seeds have stiff husks, on the order of wheat except stiffer. Roasting helps to dry and crack open the husks. One of the best uses of this grass comes from a tribe in Africa. They place the stalks of foxtail grasses over the opening in the grain storage shelter. The rats and mice get their fur so miserably tangled with the stiff husks that they leave the grain protected by these grasses alone!

Crab grass is used as a rice substitute and goose grass seeds make a flour substitute when mixed with white flour in a biscuit or muffin. Knotweed seeds are also a cereal substitute. This is a backyard and sidewalk crack pest.

Fresh and dried grass that has been ground very fine is said to be nutritious and healthful. It may be used in soups, stews, casseroles, on pizza, or on any food preparations where herbs are added.

I can remember a small boy who had been lost for several days said he stayed alive by drinking water out of the stream and eating grass. Not only does it give us an abundance of scenic color, it can also be a lifesaver.



**JACK IN THE PULPIT,  
INDIAN TURNIP**

(*Arisaema atorubens*)

**GREEN DRAGON**

(*Arisaema dracontium*)

FLOWERS: April - June

DESCRIPTION: Three  
leaflets on single stalk.  
Flower folds over  
spadix, jack. Tiny  
flowers attach to jack.  
Arum Family.

HABITAT: Rich wooded  
areas, low bottom  
thickets

LOCATION: Statewide

COLLECTION: Early spring  
and late autumn

USES: Breadstuff, chip

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CAUTION: See page 212

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What a unique plant is this Jack in the Pulpit! The tiny flowers are attached to the spadix, or Jack, which is surrounded by his canopied pulpit. The plant is recognized in the fall (one of the times for collecting the underground, round root or corm) by clusters of berries which are green and turn to a bright red.

The plant's leaves and roots could cause poisoning if eaten in large quantities. However, according to the *American Botanist*, it would be most unlikely that large amount would be consumed raw. "When a small piece of the fresh corm is chewed the mouth feels as if being pinched with countless needles, especially at the base of the tongue ... The sensation ceases ... [if the] tongue is held

perfectly still, but the least movement renews the prickly sensations that tingles like shocks of electricity. In the course of 20 minutes most of the tingling passes off, but one may feel faint twinges for an hour or longer."

Being somewhat of the adventuresome nature, I felt a tiny scrape would give me the idea without the lasting effects. I took a corm that I had been drying for 2 weeks and scraped a TINSY, WEENSY, MINUTE bite off. Sure enough, it *does* feel like countless needles are hammering away at the tongue, but at the tip of mine. The article certainly knew what it was talking about. It goes without saying that the corm is VERY peppery.

86 It is amazing to me, with that experience as a starter, how anyone ever persevered the trials of elimination to discover that the corm, when dried but not when boiled, could prove to be edible!!!

Roasting in a slow oven for three days and nights will do it. Cutting the corm into thin slices, putting aside for several months (3-5) will also do it. When dried, the thin crisp may be eaten as is or ground and used as a flour. Angier's cookie recipe is good. The recipe for Jack in the Pulpit cookies is as follows: beat two egg yolks, until thick. Add 1 cup brown sugar and beat into yolk. Mix in  $\frac{1}{4}$  t salt and 1 cup nuts (hazelnuts are awfully good). Beat two egg whites until they form stiff peaks and fold into the above mixture. Sift 3 T Jack in the Pulpit flour and 3 T all purpose flour and stir into batter. Drop onto cookie sheet in 350-degree oven for about 7 minutes.

One source suggested using the dried chips with a dip as you would potato chips. Biscuits, pancakes, etc., may be made from the flour which Fernald states has a hint of cocoa flavoring.

I feel so smug because I discovered a valley of Jack in the Pulpits at our farm. Not only do they add a page to my edible sampling, I think they are downright cute!



**CAT BRIER or GREENBRIER**  
(*Smilax tamnoids*)

FLOWERS: May - June

DESCRIPTION: Green stems, usually thorny. Tendrils for climbing.

HABITAT: Low woods in valleys and thickets, along streams, rich wooded slopes

LOCATION: Statewide

COLLECTION: May - August, tendrils; October - April, roots

USES: Vegetable, raw, pickle, flour, soup, jelly

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Bristly greenbrier is indeed exactly that — a green-stemmed plant literally covered with bristly brier-like protrusions. Judging from outward appearances, I would very likely leave this growth alone. However, like many thorny bushes and plants, it has a product worth testing. In this case, a vegetable superb! This is a climbing plant, the base of which is seen all year as it doesn't die all the way back in the winter. Starting in May, and continuing through August, the climbing ends of tendrils form a fat, fleshy stem which snaps off easily. This is truly an outstanding asparagus-like vegetable served raw, boiled, or in a casserole. It has very few competitors equal in elegance.

My favorite way to serve greenbrier shoots is to boil them for a few minutes, drain, and coat with melted butter. However, Greenbrier Casserole is a delicious dish. To fix, dip the greenbrier shoots in hot water for 10 - 15 minutes. Place a layer of greenbrier shoots in a greased casserole, then a layer of sliced hard-boiled eggs, another greenbrier layer, egg layer, ending with greenbrier.



Make a sauce by melting 6 T butter, blending in 6 T flour and 2 cups bubbling hot milk,  $\frac{1}{2}$  t salt,  $\frac{1}{2}$  t pepper, and  $\frac{1}{8}$  t mace. Melt 1 cup grated cheddar cheese in the sauce and pour over the layers. Bake at 350 degrees for about 30 minutes. This is elegant and a delightful dinner party dish.

The roots may be dug in late fall and throughout the winter when the food source is stored in the large rootstock and heavy feeder roots. To obtain a flour, dry the cleaned roots thoroughly, cut them up, pound on the roots, and sift or strain out the fine talc. This flour may then be used for baking, making jelly, or concocting a drink. The drink is made by adding water, honey or sugar to sweeten, and a small amount of greenbrier flour. It's not very good, and I haven't been able to find out if it's healthful or not! Surely it is good for something!!

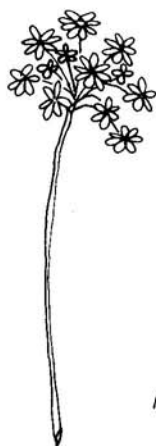
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When making jelly, only half the usual amount of sugar is needed. Full amounts produce a thick gel. The water turns a dark brown when boiled with the root. A simpler way to make jelly is to add honey, hot water and greenbrier flour, mix. When it cools it forms a jelly.

The greenbrier shoots may be placed in the dill crock. Check page 7.

It just goes to prove the old saying, "You can't judge a book by its cover." Judge this plant for yourself. It's worth taking the time to become acquainted.





**CARRION FLOWER** (*Smilax*  
.. species)

**FLOWERS:** April - May

**DESCRIPTION:** Climbing vine, thornless, non-woody, tendrils. Star-shaped flowers smell of carrion. Lily Family.

**HABITAT:** Rich woods, base of bluffs, along streams

**LOCATION:** Central and northern Missouri, common. Scattered and absent in southern counties

**COLLECTION:** April - July

**USES:** Vegetable

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The carrion flower, with its smooth stem and many tendrils, is a high climbing vine. This common name is no doubt due to the foul-smelling flowers.

If the smell doesn't prevent you from trying the plant, you are in for a pleasant surprise. The young end shoots snap off easily when gathered in spring or early summer. Boil the shoots in two waters for two minutes each. Salt and butter.

The roots are reputed to have qualities similar to the green-brier.

## **WILLOWS** (*Salix*)

**FLOWERS:** April - May

**DESCRIPTION:** Long, narrow, toothed leaves. Pointed tip, round or pointed base. Green twigs turn reddish brown. Male and female flowers separate on same tree. Willow Family.

**HABITAT:** Along streams, swamps, wet woods

**LOCATION:** Statewide

**COLLECTION:** March - May

**USES:** Salad, vegetable, aspirin



The inner bark (cambium) of the willow contains a nutritional food to be used in emergency survival. The flowering buds may be eaten raw or put in a salad. The taste is not strong or disagreeable in any way and is a high source of Vitamin C. These small buds may be boiled as a vegetable and buttered. While the taste of the cooked bud is not really bad, it is hardly worth the effort of collection. It would, however, make a tasty dish if I were VERY hungry or surviving in the wilds.

The young willow leaves are also edible raw in a salad, with a reported vitamin C bonus that surpasses an orange ten times.

Another use for the willow twig was a cure for headaches. The substance found in the twig is the same thing we call aspirin. "Go chew on a willow twig" might be a medical solution for a pain in the head rather than a put-down insult from a pain in the neck!!!